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AUTHOR	Graves, Ginny
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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking, responsible citizenship, cultural literacy, social relevancy; these concerns of educators in the social studies can be addressed through teaching and learning about the built environment. The tangible structures that humans have created (bridges, houses, factories, farms, monuments) constitute the built environment. Objects in the built environment can be used to enhance teaching and learning in core subjects of the social studies (history, geography, civics, and economics). This digest discusses: (1) what built environment education is; (2) why it belongs in the school curriculum; (3) how to connect it to the social studies; (4) how to initiate successful programs on it in schools; and (5) model programs and resources for teachers. (Author)

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2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 (812) 855-3838

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Teaching about the Built Environment

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Critical thinking, responsible citizenship, cultural literacy, social relevancy; these concerns of educators in the social studies can be addressed through teaching and learning about the built environment. The tangible structures that humans have created (e.g., bridges, houses, factories, farms, monuments) constitute the built environment. Objects in the built environment can be used to enhance teaching and learning in core subjects of the social studies—history, geography, civics, and economics. This Digest discusses (1) what built environment education is, (2) why it belongs in the school curriculum, (3) how to connect it to the social studies, (4) how to initiate successful programs on it in schools, and (5) model programs and resources for teachers.

What Is Built Environment Education? Architecture and other facets of the material culture are the focal points of built environment education. For instance, it includes teaching and learning about city planning, architectural and landscape design, preservation of historic sites, and the issues and challenges raised by these activities. In general, the means and ends, and the conditions and consequences of human interventions in the natural environment comprise the subject matter of built environment education. This includes teaching students to care for the built environment as it fits into the natural environment.

Built environment education pertains to a great variety of places, objects, and processes. Parks, streets, schools, statues, and signs are included. So are recycling of resources and developing of model communities. And it refers to decision making about public issues, such as saving historically significant sites and balancing the sometimes conflicting goals of environmental protection and economic development.

Built environment educators want to increase the knowledge of their students about the interrelationships of humans with their environments in the past and present and in different parts of the world. They also want to develop critical thinking skills in response to environmental issues. And they hope to foster positive attitudes about environmental stewardship and historic preservation toward the end of high-quality built environments, designed to be aesthetically pleasing, functional, safe, and responsive to the various needs of different people.

Why Does Built Environment Education Belong in Elementary and Secondary Schools? A key to improving the quality of our built environment is widespread education about it. Citizens who lack knowledge of the built environment are not likely to act effectively to remedy deficiencies in it. Professionals in architecture and design, for example, have reported that the public seems unable to tap their expertise to assist in the remediation of built environment deficiencies. Most members of the general public do not even know what to ask for. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) formed a focus committee to look for a solution to this problem.

The AIA focus committee recognized that there are many approaches to educating the public about the built environment and the role of architects in maintaining and enhancing it. One necessary solution to the knowledge gap, however, is to infuse more of the right kind of information and ideas into the classrooms of elementary and secondary schools. The goal is to develop responsible citizens, who are knowledgeable and adamant about improving their quality of life through enhancement of the built environment. The AIA focus committee, therefore, recommended that all students from kindergarten through grade twelve should be educated about the built environment in their standard courses in science, mathematics, English, art, and social studies (Sandler 1988). This recommendation has also been advanced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation (Weitzman 1988) and the National Council for Preservation Education (Committee on Elementary-Secondary Education 1987).

All advocates of general education about the built environment emphasize that the best means for adding it to the curriculum is infusion—integration with existing curriculum patterns—rather than creation of new courses or stand-alone units of study. Standard subjects in the curriculum provide numerous points of entry for teaching about the built environment. This kind of education about the built environment is not directed primarily to preparation of architects, historians, city planners, or other professionals. Rather, the purpose is to inform members of the general public about the issues and challenges of their built/natural environment and the role they can play in maintaining and improving upon its quality.

How Does Built Environment Education Fit into the Social Studies Curriculum? Built environment education fits easily into the standard subjects of the social studies such as history, geography, civics, and economics. Consider, for example, the relevancy of using a nearby and familiar building or site as a "learning hook" and a "visual history book" for students in a high school United States history course. Historic buildings can be used as primary sources in the study of persons and events associated with a place. And studies of architecture in different places and periods of history provide insights about continuity and change in various civilizations. Examination of architecture in different civilizations is a useful exercise in comparative historical studies.

The five main themes of geography education can easily be connected to objects in the built environment. These five themes are (1) location, (2) place, (3) human-environment interactions, (4) movement of people, ideas, goods, and (5) formation and change of regions. It is impossible to teach these themes without

Ginny Graves is a regional education coordinator for the American Institute of Architects, 5328 West 67th Street, Prairie Village, KS 66208 (913) 262-0691.

reference to the built environment. Teachers should be urged to emphasize these connections through field trips and video programs that provide direct and vivid instruction about architecture and other aspects of the built environment.

Issues in city planning and community development can be treated in civics and economics courses. So can lessons in responsible citizenship that pertain to the ethics of environmental stewardship and historic preservation.

How Can Teachers Initiate Successful Built Environment Education Programs in Schools? The Missouri Council of Architects has developed an excellent model for starting and sustaining a successful built environment education program. This model, Teach the Teachers, has been used to train more than 4,500 elementary and secondary school teachers in Missouri and Kansas, and through a ripple effect, thousands of students. These teachers have received thirty to forty-five hours of contact with excellent professionals in the fields of architecture, preservation, landscaping, city planning, and history. After the teachers have been shown how to use the built environment as a teaching tool, they begin to develop their own curriculum materials and activities for use in their classrooms. Furthermore, these trained teachers develop skills in disseminating their knowledge and materials to other teachers through workshops and other inservice education activities.

The success of the Teach the Teachers program has been demonstrated in the quantity and quality of the curriculum materials developed by participants and their widespread use in schools. In addition, the number of people affected by the program continues to increase. Furthermore, in 1989, Teach the Teachers was selected as one of ten model built environment education programs in the United States through a survey conducted by the American Institute of Architecture and the National Endowment for the Arts. The program has also won awards from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Continuing Education Association, and the Kansas and Missouri Arts Commissions.

A portfolio of materials describing the Teach the Teachers program and how to start it in your city or state is available from the Center for Understanding the Built Environment, American Institute of Architects, 104 West 9th Street, Kansas City, MI 64105 (816) 221-3485. Send $15. A list of resources for teachers is included in this package.

What Are Other Model Programs and Resources for Teachers on Built Environment Education? Several other model programs in built environment education are described in the AIA's LEARNING BY DESIGN SOURCEBOOKS, Numbers 1 and 2. In establishing a built environment program, organizations should follow examples set by successful programs and adapt them to meet various local conditions and needs. Three examples of successful programs are highlighted below.

The Massie Heritage Education Center in Savannah, Georgia, operates out of an old school that is maintained and operated by the local school district. Students take field trips to the school to see exhibits and take walking tours. A video program is available that tells about the activities of the center. Contact Thomas Downen, 207 East Gordon Street, Savannah, GA 31401.

As part of the Tampa, Florida, Teachers Teaching Teachers program, fourth graders tour historic Ybor City. Teachers must have participated in a training course before they are given the walking tour materials. Students receive their own walking tour notebooks to complete. Selected fourth-grade teachers receive training and then become trainers of teachers. Eventually all fourth-grade teachers in the Hillsborough County School System will have had the built environment education training. This program is provided through a partnership of Tampa Preservation Incorporated, the Tampa Junior League, the Hillsborough County School System, and the American Institute of Architects. Contact Nancy Crane, TPI, 2802 T. Drive, Tampa, FL 22609.

In Washington, the State Board of Education funds Architecture and Children workshops for teachers each summer. Selected teachers are paid to attend the week-long program. Contact Anne Taylor, School Zone, Inc., 111 South Jackson Street, Seattle, WA 98106.

All of the successful programs rely on synergistic partnerships (e.g., school district and historic organization, AIA and state board of education, service league and architectural and design professionals). It is this partnering or synergism that is working so well through built environment education programs that will help us to develop and sustain high-quality lifestyles in our home, the earth.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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